

Comment

The rats in Paris bring out a sneaking feeling of fraternité

JANE SHILLING



‘Rats! They fought the dogs, and killed the cats/And bit the babies in the cradles/And ate the cheeses out of the vats,/And licked the soup from the cooks’ own ladles.’

Across the Channel, Robert Browning’s poetic vision of the plague of rodents that infested 13th-century Hamelin is playing out in real life. Paris, the city of light, has become the city of rats, its human inhabitants outnumbered two to one by a horde of scuttling vermin. And, as in Browning’s Hamelin, it is the mayor, Anne Hidalgo, who is blamed for the infestation. Her policy of increasing the city’s green spaces is said to have provided ideal conditions for rats to thrive, and nine parks have been closed while the municipal authorities consider their next move.

Most of us manage to ignore the fact that we live on terms of cosy intimacy with *Rattus norvegicus*. Next to humans, it is the most successful mammal on earth; but, unlike us, it has the tact not to advertise the fact too boldly, pursuing a quiet life in the conduits and crevices of our domestic infrastructure and thriving on the rich banquet of edible detritus that we discard.

There are plenty of other creatures with similar lifestyles: pigeons, seagulls and urban foxes make free with our living space and scavenge our leftovers without attracting anything like the opprobrium that attaches to rats. But nobody loves a rat. From Beatrix Potter’s *Tale of Samuel Whiskers* to George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, they are furry packages of dread and horror. Even *Ratatouille*, the animation featuring a convivial Gallic rat with a talent for cooking, couldn’t improve their lamentable image.

In Britain our response to a rat problem tends to be robust. We send for the terrier man or his urban equivalent, the pest control officer. In France, Frenchly, they talk about it. Six months

ago, Paris hosted an international seminar with the optimistic title of “Strategies for rat management in the urban environment”. There could be no question of elimination, the experts agreed. The goal must be to maintain an acceptable ratio of rats to humans, perhaps by developing an app along the lines of Waze, the navigation system that alerts motorists to the presence of lurking gendarmes: Raze, as it were.

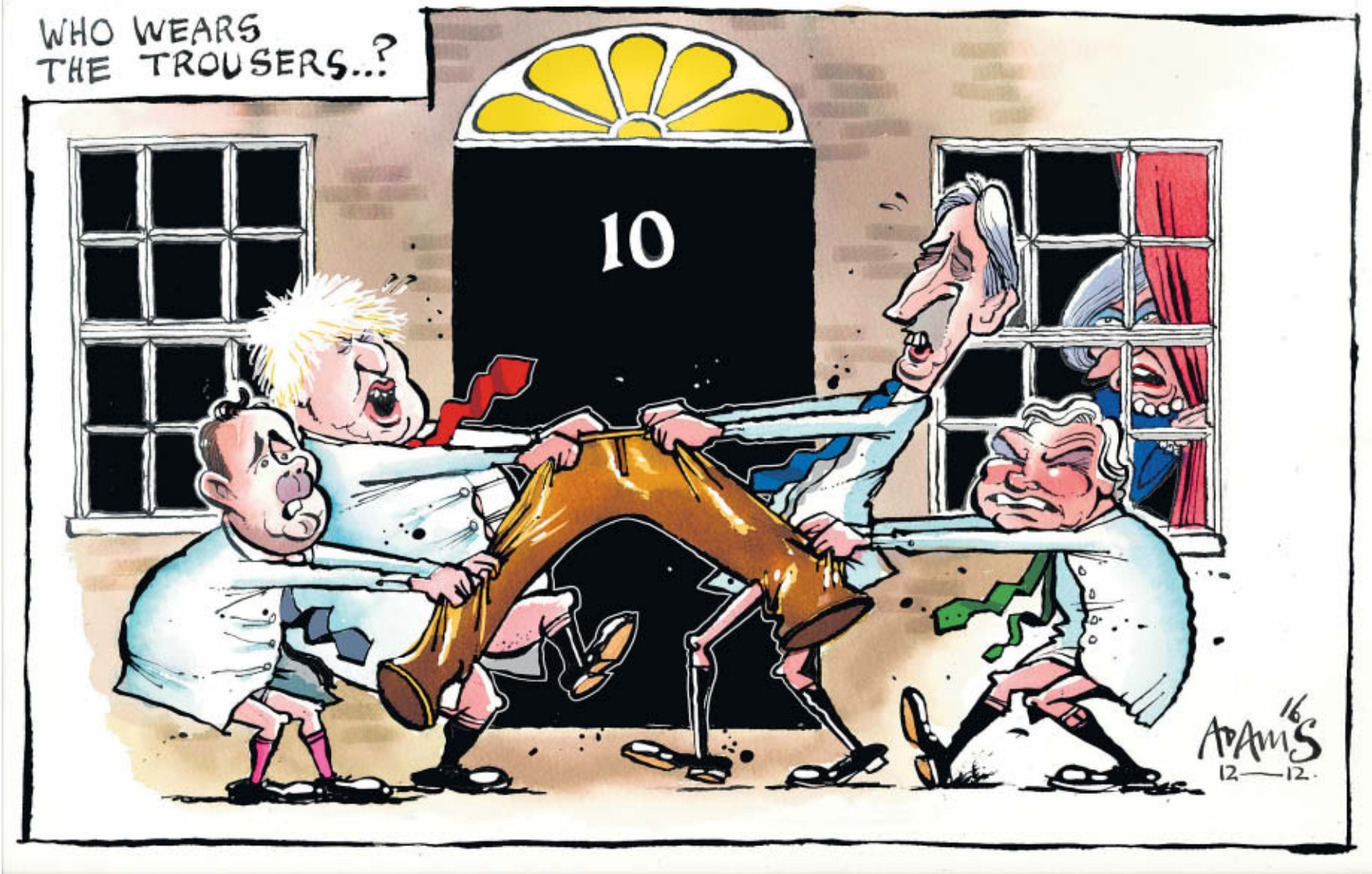
Then Pierre Falgayrac, author of *Of Rats and Men*, took the floor to discuss rat-like cunning. In Marseilles he had seen rats waiting for traffic lights to turn red before crossing the road. In Pau they had learnt to sleep until midday, when the garbage was put out. *Le Monde* reported “silence in the room” at these revelations.

If there was dismay in that silence, there may also have been a certain reluctant fellow feeling. Perhaps we dislike rats precisely because we apprehend resonances of our own behaviour. Why, *Le Monde* wondered, is the reputation of rats so poor? After all, a study published in the journal *Nature Neuroscience* found that they experienced that most human of emotions, regret.

Since childhood I have entertained a sneaking regard for the greatest rat in literature: Templeton from EB White’s children’s novel, *Charlotte’s Web*. Venal, cynical and self-serving, he is Sir John Falstaff in rodent form. The thought that his latter-day avatars may be found strolling into La Closerie des Lilas or snuggling up to Anna Wintour at Paris Fashion Week is strangely cheering. To paraphrase Baudelaire: Hypocrite rat, – mon semblable, – mon frère!



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The Left are being sore losers and democracy is the poorer for it

The people’s verdicts in the US and on Brexit are unpalatable to liberals, so they challenge the results

TIM STANLEY



If 2016 has taught us anything it is that people define democracy as getting what they want. If they win an election, it was fair. If they lose, it was rigged. Democracy is in crisis, says the Left, because, from America to Britain to Italy and beyond, the people keep making the wrong choices.

Take the United States. Donald Trump’s victory was a surprise – we get that. It was narrow, for sure. And it was controversial – no doubt. But it happened. What ought to obsess the Democrats and the media is what he intends to do next. His cabinet choices suggest Trump will govern the way he ran, from the Right, and that he isn’t afraid of confronting the consensus on everything from climate change to relations with Russia. There’s so much to scrutinise.

Unfortunately, the Democrats and the media would prefer to engage in a ceaseless critique of his victory in the hope that it’ll go away. The latest claim is that Moscow swung the election. The CIA has apparently concluded that Russia hacked into Democratic email accounts with the specific intention of embarrassing Clinton and helping Trump win. Many liberals are convincing themselves that the

election was fixed. The debate was distorted by “fake news”.

The Republicans stole votes in the rust belt. And Clinton actually won the national popular vote – so can we re-run the election?! The answer is no, of course; but that won’t prevent millions from refusing to regard Trump as the genuine democratic choice.

The Republicans have every right to be angry about this. Perhaps Russia did try to affect the election, and it ought to be investigated and exposed. But there’s no evidence that they succeeded. WikiLeaks did not play a big role in 2016 – its revelations were small fry.

The FBI, which resurrected claims that Hillary did something wrong with her email account, had far greater impact. And all that WikiLeaks and the FBI did was reinforce decades-old suspicions that Clinton is a liar. Her approval rating in October 2015 was about -19 per cent. By election day it was about -13 per cent. The scandals had very little impact.

Also, didn’t the Democrats employ a few dark arts themselves? Did they not stack the primary process to Hillary’s advantage? It’s surprising, too, that the Democrats suddenly care so much about the transparency of the voting process, having rejected Republican warnings about potential fraud for years. But the Left isn’t big on self-awareness. Consider the campaign of Jill Stein, the Green presidential candidate, to recount votes in the states that swung it for Trump on the rather rude assumption that because he won he must have cheated.

Trump won Wisconsin by a margin of about 27,000 votes; Stein got 30,000 votes there. Trump took Michigan by 11,000; Stein got 50,000. So there are at least two states that arguably were lost not because of a

conspiracy by the Right but because of divisions on the Left. It was an old-fashioned political cock-up.

The militant Remainers are playing a similar game in the UK. They question not only the referendum result but the referendum itself. It doesn’t count, they say, because the Leave campaign lied. Leave would dispute that – but so what if they did? Have you ever known an election in which a politician didn’t fib? It’s up to the voters to play detective, and most of them are smart enough to sort the fact from the fiction. I have yet to meet the sucker who voted Leave to save the NHS.

“The referendum was only advisory!” cry the Remainers. The legal arguments against this are mountainous and they boil down to “no it wasn’t.” But even if it was, there’s still a moral imperative to accept the result. If the referendum had come out for Remain and Parliament had a Eurosceptic majority that decided to plan for Brexit anyway, what would the Europhiles be saying then? That the referendum result was holy writ. But because they lost, they bring their lawyers and their peers and they invoke – of all things! – the importance of Parliament, because there they hope they have a majority for Remain.

Enter Tim Farron’s Liberal Democrats, a party whose very name is an oxymoron. Liberal? Maybe. But Democratic? The two no longer mix. The Lib Dems have been banging on for decades about the importance of electoral reform only in so far as they thought it would get them more seats. Now that the exercise of democracy has produced a result they don’t like, they suddenly despise the exercise of democracy.

Their shameless hypocrisy is shown



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in their fluctuating support for an EU referendum. First, they demanded an in/out referendum. Then, when it looked like a plebiscite might actually be held, they opposed it. Having lost it, they now want another one. “Let the people decide,” said Farron, knowing full well that they already have.

The chutzpah doesn’t end there. Having labelled a democratic outcome as somehow anti-democratic, they also insist that the Leavers – like Trump in the US – are dangerous authoritarians. Theresa May, Nigel Farage, and the populist Right want a Putin-style police state, apparently – and democratic support for them is a sad turning away from democracy.

If you’re struggling to follow that logic then it’s because the word “democracy” is losing its meaning. Many liberals are quite happy for the state to be powerful so long as they are in control of it, and elections go their way. A democracy ceases to be a democracy when it moves to the Right. Then we need Jill Stein or Tim Farron to clean up our mess and restore order.

Let’s not be naïve: conservatives play these word games, too. Trump had said that the presidential election was rigged before he’d even won it. Farage said he’d continue to fight for Brexit when he assumed that he’d lost the referendum. Perhaps our politics would be more honest if both sides admitted that they want power and don’t care as much about process as they pretend to. But this means that the process is sadly diminished.

Some people are at risk of forgetting that democratic elections are wonderful, splendid human achievements – even if you don’t win them. And critical engagement with the victors is far, far more valuable than being a loud, sore loser.

A Nobel gesture from the voice of protest

Bob Dylan is too busy making music to collect awards – and he shouldn’t be castigated for that

TOM PAYNE



‘To live outside the law, you must be honest.’ It’s one of my favourite Bob Dylan sound-bites, and I can’t resist applying this standard to his conduct since he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. Others have felt the same, too. When he didn’t arrive in Stockholm to receive the award at the weekend, sending Patti Smith instead, reporters looked for signs that Dylan was snooty or nonchalant.

The *New York Times* reported that on Saturday morning, the very moment when good manners suggest he should have been in Sweden for the ceremony, his house was visited by a plumbing contractor, while witnesses saw a couple of SUVs admitted into the

grounds. Staff, however, denied the singer was home.

So, he was living, if not outside the law, at least outside the precepts of etiquette. But was he being straightforward? In a statement he said he was immensely touched that anyone could consider his work as literature. If that sounds like a way of saying, “Aw, shucks”, he likened himself to Shakespeare, whom he called “the great literary figure”.

He wasn’t saying, look at me, they think I’m as good as Shakespeare. He was making the sensible point that Shakespeare was more interested in the practical business of putting on plays than on his legacy as a writer. True, the sonnets tell a different story; but Dylan still has a point – even if the practical business at hand all around his own watchtower was something more prosaic, like drainage or a new bathroom.

This makes one doubt if he was being entirely honest, though I must confess that I bought it. I believe that everyday matters were easier for the great man to deal with than the terrifying responsibility of winning a prize that indicates to the world, “You’re great – you’re the best in the world – but you’re getting on, and your best work is behind you.”

From its inception, the Nobel Prize for Literature has honoured writers whose words work in the cause of idealism. This makes Dylan an excellent recipient for an oeuvre that has been visionary, though to look at the world at the moment, some may wonder if a few Dylan lyrics are enough to put things right.

The truth is that the writers of integrity who have won the Nobel Prize have felt discomfited by what outsiders might imagine to be a great honour. In 1969, Samuel Beckett called it “a catastrophe” and refused to go to the ceremony. When Doris Lessing heard the news in 2007 her response was “Oh Christ!” Although she’d hoped to use the prize to promote action against inequality, in practice it left her with no energy for writing.

Like Dylan, Seamus Heaney was hard to find when he was named laureate in 1995. At the time he was walking in Greece and for all we know, he was the picture of grace on hearing the news. But a clue to his feelings can be discerned from his response on learning that the award for the subsequent year had gone to the Polish poet Wisława Szymborska, “Poor Wisława,” said Heaney.

When Derek Walcott’s publishers organised a celebratory meal after he



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was awarded the 1992 prize, the poet cried off, saying that he was ill. That may well have been true. But given what we know about other “victims” of the prize, it’s fair to speculate that this malady was at least in part psychological.

All this makes Dylan’s reaction not so much rude as right. As he said of the announcement: “I was out on the road when I received this surprising news, and it took me more than a few minutes to properly process it.” Moreover, it is harder to do so for a writer whose trade is to make his words live in front of an audience. After all, he still wants to have a voice in the world, rather than to have it archived and revered.

Weeks after the announcement, Bob Dylan is evidently still taking it in. In six months’ time, however, he is supposed to give the lecture that counts as an acceptance of the honour, at which point the Academy hands over the eight million Swedish Krona that goes with the prize. If the plumbers are back in again, that would pay for a walk-in shower and even for a new boiler. But will he turn up? We could hardly blame him if he didn’t.

Tom Payne teaches English at Sherborne School

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